

Smoking aloft: an illustrated history

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1920s and 1930s

The emergence of civil aviation was associated with glamour, daring and sophistication. At the same time, smoking was being promoted and popularised. The two industries were often depicted together in cigarette advertisements with an aviation theme. Advertisers often linked women to smoking and flight. Images of aviators and aviatrixes such as Amelia Earhart were invoked to sell cigarettes.





1940s

Cigarettes were very popular during the second world war. Advertisements and posters from this time often depicted flying and smoking together. Although smoking was not initially permitted on airplanes, cigarette companies provided sample packs to customers.



1980s to present

By the 1980s, the failure of adjustable non-smoking sections to diminish cabin air pollution motivated a handful of flight attendants in the USA to lobby Congress for eradication of smoking aloft. The tobacco industry attempted to subvert these efforts by creating such terms as "environmental tobacco smoke", conducting bogus research, and dismissing allegations of harm from secondhand smoke as hysteria. In the late 1980s and 1990s the quest by flight attendants for legal redress for harm suffered from occupational exposure to tobacco smoke resulted in the largest class action settlement in the history of tobacco litigation and the creation of the Flight Attendant Medical Research Institute.

The second-hand smokescreen.

For decades, public and private organizations have waged a massive campaign to discourage cigarette smoking. For most of that time, the target of this effort has been the smoker.

Recently, however, the emphasis has undergone a major shift. Today there are scientists who claim that cigarette smoke in the air can actually cause disease in non-smokers. We hear a great deal about "second-hand smoke" and "passive smoking."

But is this new approach wholly motivated by concern for the non-smoker, or is it the same old war on smoking in a new guise?

These doubts are raised when we recall statements like the following by a spokesperson for the American Lung Association:

Probably the only way we can win a substantial reduction in smoking is if we can somehow make it more difficult to smoke. We thought the issue of a medical research and opinion would produce a major reduction in smoking.

Obviously, one way to make smoking "more difficult socially" would be to suggest that second-hand smoke could cause disease. So it is not surprising that we are now seeing a flurry of research seeking scientific support for these suggestions.

Many independent experts believe the scientific evidence on passive smoking is questionable. But a vocal group of anti-smokers are using this issue in their campaign against tobacco as if the claims were established scientific fact.

We ignore the actions of those who try to manipulate public opinion through scare tactics. As the late, respected pathologist, Dr. H. Russell Fisher, stated in testimony submitted to a Congressional hearing on passive smoking:

... [I]n the absence of any scientific proof of harm from environmental tobacco smoke, the use of such scare tactics is not only unethical, but also a reckless one. It is my belief that the use of such tactics is a deliberate attempt to mislead the public and to cause confusion and panic among the people.

We are not ignoring the fact that right-to-life strikes can be bothersome to many non-smokers. But we believe this problem has been solved not by governments but by individuals, and not with more rhetoric but with more common sense and courtesy.

Of course, if anti-smoking advocates want to work for the abolition of smoking, that is their right. We only wish they would come out from behind their second-hand smokescreen.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company



With support from the Flight Attendant Medical Research Institute, The University of Alabama Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society is documenting the history of smoking on commercial aircraft. This pictorial review was based on an exhibit presented